Context is King

The Importance of Regional Narratives and History to the Special Operator and Strategic Communications

BY JONATHON COSGROVE

"We are better persuaded, for the most part, by the reasons that we ourselves arrived at than by those that have come into the minds of others." – Blaise Pascal

The Special Operations Forces (SOF) community is exceptional and unique in the broader institution of the United States military. The U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) states as chief among the "SOF Truths" that "people—not equipment—make the critical difference" in the success of special operations.[2] Although clearly referring to the highly trained members of the SOF across the service branches, this truth also reflects the importance of people (or "the human domain")[3] in SOF missions. The factors of the human domain are "the psychological, cultural, behavioral, and other human attributes that influence decisionmaking, the flow of information, and the interpretation of information by individuals and groups."[4] It is hard to overstate the importance of these human factors to the special operator.

The focus of this article will be on the missions and doctrines most closely associated with U.S. Army Special Operations Forces (ARSOF), which are by their nature particularly concerned with the human factors of a given area of operations. Two core ARSOF tasks, unconventional warfare (UW)[5] and foreign internal defense (FID),[6] are missions that require personal, one-on-one interaction with either an indigenous resistance movement or a friendly host government to foster shared commitment and action toward a common objective. In both UW and FID, the sentiments and motivations of the regional population are critical factors to mission success and must be central in strategic and operational planning. Special operators strive to address and

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influence these sentiments and motivations through narratives—the stories through which people and societies understand beliefs, values, norms, and themselves.[7]

Throughout the history of U.S. special operations and counterinsurgency (COIN), the efforts to address popular sentiments in areas of operations through narratives (such as "winning hearts and minds") have had mixed results. Understanding regional history and narratives can offer key insights for more consistently successful military information support operations (MISO)[8] and strategic communications[9] to achieve sustainable mission objectives. This mindset will be critical as the SOF community looks ahead to the missions of the 21st century, where the human domain will continue to be paramount.

In summary, U.S. Army and ARSOF doctrine on irregular warfare (IW)[10] provides critical insights on the importance of regional, historic, and cultural narratives and their roles in irregular conflicts and mission success. Successful strategic communications depend on the resonance of the narrative they present. An operational narrative resonates best when it both addresses the needs of the population (or audience) and does so in a way that is consistent with what they hold to be true. If strategic communications contradict or do not reinforce the long-established and deeply-held perceptions of the target audience, the message will fail to resonate and will instead sound foreign or counterfeit, producing neither action nor good will. For this reason, the special operator must be an expert in these cultural narratives, and adept at perceiving and using them to shape the information and military environments.

Narrative and History in Army Doctrine on Irregular Warfare

Doctrine in Field Manual (FM) 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, addresses important points on the role of narrative and history in IW, informs SOF missions (specifically COIN, but also speaks to principles at the core of both UW and FID), and is well cited in ARSOF doctrine specific to these core tasks.

According to FM 3-24, resistance takes root in the desire of individuals to throw off conditions imposed on them by a government or occupying power that diverge from their interests, aspirations, values, and way of life. These conditions and associated perceptions are root causes, which "can be summarized as a broad perception of injustice linked to the government that insurgents use to mobilize a population,"[11] and can include infringements on identity or religion, the presence of foreign forces, government corruption, land disputes, and gaps between popular expectations of the government and its capability to meet their expectations.[12] However, a general attitude of discontent and the existence of root causes alone do not necessarily lead to insurgency. The population must also possess the will to bear significant hardships, as countermeasures against resistance are often severe.

While root causes are the components that can coalesce into the will to resist, insurgency is not a necessary conclusion, as "these conditions exist in many places where an insurgency does not."[13] The framework that mobilizes part of the population from grievances to resistance is a cohesive narrative for action. Examples flourish throughout history and include the Marxist story of the inevitable rise of a long-dormant proletariat against an oppressive bourgeoisie retold by Communist party

vanguards, as well as that told by Sayyid Qutb, a leading member of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in the 1950s and 1960s, of a global Muslim community that is spiritually dead and must be reconquered from the clutches of godlessness through jihad.[14]

The narrative "links grievances to a political agenda and mobilizes the population to support a violent social movement."[15] It does this by assigning blame for wrongs, explaining how grievances will be addressed, and proclaiming a call to action that presents the uprising as likely to succeed if the insurgent forces and population work together. Because an insurgency must justify its actions, the narrative framework is usually constructed around an ideology.[16] "Not all insurgencies are ideological,"[17] doctrine states, but "[i]deology often provides a coherent set of ideas that provide a compelling framework for a narrative"[18] that resonates with the population. Turning again to Qutb's *Milestones*, the primacy of sharia law not only gave his call to action ideological coherence, but also served as the focus and final purpose of the whole enterprise.[19] The ideal made real on Earth.

Narrative resonance—when a story is instinctively accepted as plausible—is a vital high ground in the information war between insurgencies and COIN operations. Each side of a conflict must either convince or pacify that segment of the population not yet committed to a side (the uncommitted majority) in order to either establish or maintain legitimacy.[20] For this reason, a poor, ill-suited, or inconsistent narrative can be the strategic downfall of any actor in irregular conflict. Narrative dissonance—when a story is instinctively rejected as implausible—can spell defeat. In Egypt, the Arab Spring brought a wave of mass protests against the authoritarianism of President Hosni Mubarak, successfully ejecting him from office. President Mohammed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood entered office on a narrative of reform from authoritarianism to democracy. However, Morsi's attempts to unilaterally monopolize power soon undermined the viability of this narrative. The story of post-authoritarian democracy was contradicted by the reality of Morsi's new, oppressive Islamist regime. The dissonance of the Muslim Brotherhood's actions with their narrative was the source of extreme dissatisfaction and popular unrest, setting the stage for yet another change of regime.[21]

In the operational context of FID or COIN, the insurgent often has a strategic advantage in constructing an effective narrative. Insurgencies are usually composed of fighters operating "in their own country and own ethnic group" who have an "intimate knowledge of...the local people and their culture."[22] This knowledge also includes close familiarity with the root causes and grievances that target populations might share with the insurgents. For example, members of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) needed no briefings on the historical, sociopolitical, and sectarian underpinnings of popular tensions between the people of Ireland and Great Britain.

COIN and FID operations, according to doctrine, must "successfully incorporate culture into planning...in order to understand the area of operations prior to developing any course of action"[23] because effective forces "must ensure that their deeds match their words and both are consistent with the broader narrative."[24] Otherwise, inconsistent actions will have negative information reactions (that is, they will create a perception that undermines credibility and plays into the

propaganda of insurgent forces).[25] Historically, one can look to the "Boston Massacre" of 1770, and the public disillusionment that followed, as an information reaction that crippled the ability of the British Empire to maintain its colonies.

The public reaction against the British crown, driven by Paul Revere's famous illustration (see figure 1), shows how a resistance movement can leverage the actions of its opponent to reinforce their story of what was wrong and their argument for why the population should side with them. Although the British soldiers were ultimately acquitted of murder, the Sons of Liberty successfully incorporated the tragedy into their own cause by

Figure 1 "The Fruits of Arbitrary Power, or the Bloody Massacre"

Paul Revere, Henry Pelham, and Christian Remick

speaking to a broader, pre-existing narrative of colonial subjugation and violence under British rule, inflaming public opinion in favor of independence on the road to war.[26] Britain could no longer convincingly argue to the colonies that its troops were there to protect them. The subsequent trial vindicated the British troops and revealed that the crowd was in fact a violent mob, but the image of helpless colonists against a firing line of Redcoats was ingrained in the public consciousness. This version of the story became so fundamental to the story of the founding of the United States that it is to this day described and taught in schools as the Boston Massacre. The innocence of the British troops appears as an afterthought at best in many modern accounts. The "bloody massacre" narrative resonated so well with the American colonists because it reinforced their own experiences and perceptions of themselves as powerless in the face of unjust British rule. The truth prevailed in the court of law, but perception won the hearts and minds of the American patriots.

Insurgents also need to be careful and keep their actions consistent with their words to protect against information reactions because their credibility can also be undermined in the eyes of the people. As chronicled by Clifford Bob in *Marketing Rebellion: Insurgents, Media, and International Activism*, insurgents in need of foreign support will often water down their radical language and narrative to make themselves attractive to foreign donors, whether they be governments or non-governmental organizations (NGOs).[27] Such efforts potentially make the resistance look hypocritical, or even bought, and represent a clear opportunity for COIN information operations. Highlighting inconsistencies in insurgent words and deeds, painting them as beholden to foreign interests—or at least inconsistent with the values and sentiments of the general population—can create an information environment that favors the government's legitimacy.

Loss of credibility can be fatal to a COIN mission. This is why "[p]ropaganda is one of the most important political tools an insurgency has." It allows the group "to create a narrative of why the government's actions are not legitimate, and how the insurgency can eliminate the root causes of the conflict."[28] The information apparatus of the insurgent force will not hesitate to leverage any action that reinforces its propaganda about the government or occupying force, and will often manipulate real-world circumstances to reinforce it. An example of deliberate insurgent actions to perpetuate propaganda narratives is found in a case in 2014 in which Hamas issued statements during a renewed cycle of violent conflict with Israel that urged Palestinian civilians to stay in their homes despite Israeli warnings of an impending strike. The situation was compounded by Hamas operations meant to draw Israeli retaliatory fire on civilian structures.[29] The maintenance of the Hamas narrative concerning Israeli military actions and their impact on Palestinian civilians is of existential importance to their operations and long-term political strategy, both of which depend on the support of Palestinians caught in the crossfire of the conflict.

As long as Hamas can successfully paint itself as the hero in the story of the Palestinian people, they will continue to secure widespread support.

The importance of regional history and indigenous culture in developing narratives cannot be overstated in U.S. Army doctrine on insurgencies. There is inherent complexity in

how culture and narrative influence "how people view their world;" it is something holistic, learned, shared, and created by people, constantly changing over time.[30] When assessing a cultural situation, the special operator is advised in doctrine that "discussing history with the local people can be a window into understanding the way that people in that area define a problem....Stories, sayings and even poetry can reveal cultural narratives, the shared explanations of why the world is a certain way."[31]

These internalized narratives—the stories of how people view themselves and their place in the world—play a central role in the will of individuals or communities to resist the government or occupier, stand with them against insurgent forces, or disengage from the conflict completely. This connection is best characterized by Thomas E. Lawrence (known more famously as "Lawrence of Arabia") in his seminal work, "Twenty-Seven Articles," on irregular warfare in the Middle East:

> *The[ir] open reason…for action or inaction may be true, but always there will be better reasons left for you to divine. You must find these inner reasons (they will be denied, but are none the less in operation) before shaping your arguments for one course or other… Their minds work just as ours do, but on different premises. There is nothing unreasonable, incomprehensible, or inscrutable in [them]. Experience of*

Magnus Manske

In Ramallah, a Palestinian city located in the central West Bank, crowds of people gather to show their support for Hamas. In certain parts of Palestine, Hamas is viewed as a protector against the Israel Defense Force (IDF).

> *them, and knowledge of their prejudices will enable you to foresee their attitude and possible course of action in nearly every case […] hear all that passes, search out what is going on beneath the surface…and keep everything you find out to yourself.*[32]

"Narratives," FM 3-24 states, "are tied to actions in an operational environment."[33] The viability of the narrative in addressing the needs of the population (that is, root causes) is key to the success of the operations and strategic communications of insurgents and governments alike. The "inner reasons" under the surface of the population are not of peripheral or secondary importance. In the 21st century, where resistance movements are more likely to succeed through popular mobilization to nonviolent protest than they are using more traditional forms of insurgency or guerrilla warfare,[34] the inner reasons that motivate people and communities to action—or deter involvement—are the center of gravity. For that reason, effective strategic communications will only become more critical to mission success in the future. Getting narratives correct in operational planning and coordinating both actions and communications to achieve and maintain resonance with the target population are essential to success in this new century of conflict.

Narrative, Needs, and Resonance

The root causes of a resistance movement or an insurgency can be understood as needs. Narrative frameworks are the rhetorical means through which a group or movement mobilizes the population to address these needs through violent or civil resistance. Needs are defined by some as "conditions within the individual that are essential and necessary for the maintenance of life and for the nurturance of growth and well-being."[35] However, for our purposes, it is important to avoid an assumption of individualism in how we conceptualize needs. Many cultures deemphasize the individual, elevating communal or tribal concerns. Strategic communications that try to reach such collectivist cultures with narratives that prioritize the concerns of individuals will be challenged in their viability from the start. Instead, Aristotle's characterization of needs is more appropriate: "Natural cravings constitute such needs; in particular cravings, accompanied by pain, for what is not being attained."[36] In other words, a need is any object or state of being without which one experiences physical or cognitive distress. The pain of hunger or thirst, the anxiety of poverty or insecurity, and the emotional instability of bereavement or discouragement all qualify, though these different forms of distress do not stem from the same *kinds* of needs.

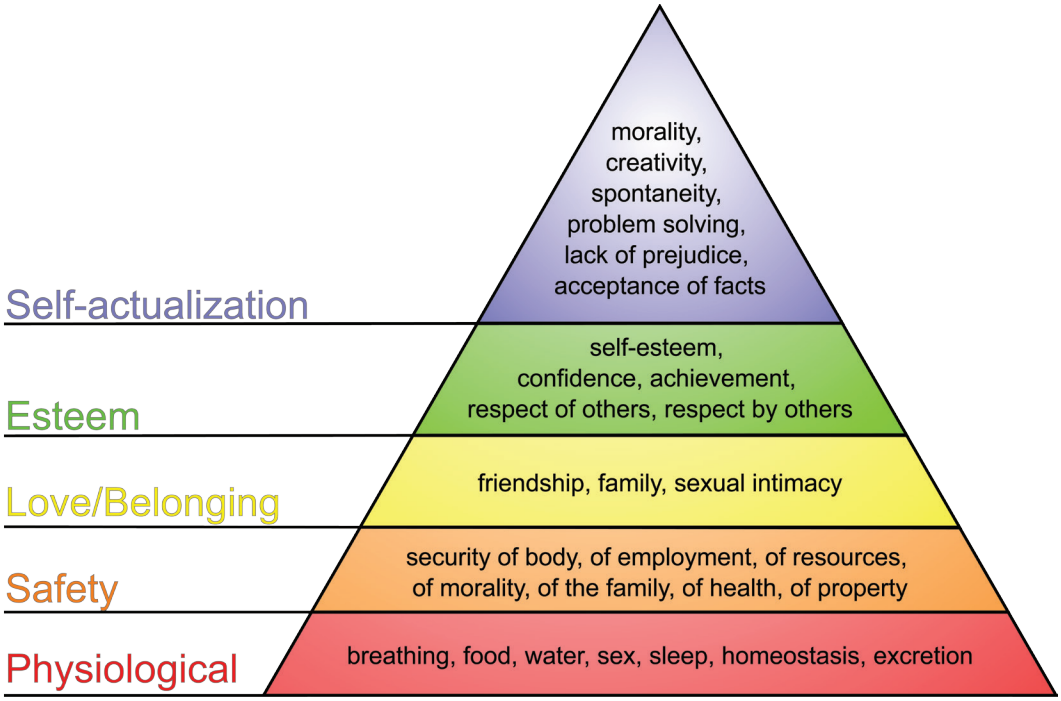
Abraham Maslow claimed that there are five general categories of needs that human beings try to satisfy in ascending order (see figure 2): *physiological* (those that keep humans alive); *safety* (security from dangers); *belonging* (includes love, companionship, and one's place in society); *self-esteem* (those concerning individual confidence and independent will); and *self-actualization* (the final goal after all other needs are met; when one becomes all they are capable of being).[37] However, this is an imperfect representation that is often criticized as focused on individualist motivations to the neglect of those in collectivist societies.[38] Such fixation on the Western mindset puts analysts at risk of mirror imaging, a cognitive trap where one assumes the target audience thinks like the analyst does. Nevertheless, Maslow's hierarchy presents a useful insight

into how the special operator should think about needs.

For the special operator, who must understand the "inner reasons" of the population to communicate for action or inaction, the general rule that needs are addressed in ascending order is of particular importance. If the target population is preoccupied with physiological and safety needs essential for survival, narratives that try to mobilize them through an appeal to ideology (self-actualization) will likely fail. The perception of a goal's attainability is also a factor here ("How can you dream of revolution when we can't put food on the table?"), and is why populations that have long lived under dictatorship are less likely to mobilize than those only recently oppressed.

The reinforcement of inevitability narratives, through time as well as propaganda, stifles resistance, whereas populations under a newly burgeoning authoritarian state can rally around the collective memory of the freedom that was only recently lost.[39] Both of these factors are often cited to explain the surprising lack of resistance against the regime of Kim Jong-un in North Korea. The persistence of widespread hunger,[40] merciless crackdowns,[41] and a long history where plans for resistance were time and again proven futile[42] have worked together to make even the thought of a successful uprising seem far-fetched to a people struggling to survive. Instead, the story in which Kim Il-sung is the "Eternal President of the Republic,"[43] whose endless reign, ominously affirmed by 3,200 obelisks across the country ("Towers of Eternal Life"),[44] is

Figure 2 Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs



combined with all the other trappings of a personality cult to reinforce an overbearing narrative of invincibility and fatalism.

Importantly, however, the use of Maslow's hierarchy presents significant risk for mirror imaging that the special operator must take caution against. In reference to the hierarchy, Steven Metz states in *Small Wars Journal* that "people become insurgents because the status quo does not fulfill their needs." This means,

> *…that the true essence of insurgency is not political objectives, but unmet psychological needs (although political objectives may serve as proxy for psychological needs as insurgent leaders seek to legitimize and popularize their efforts). While insurgency unfolds within a specific cultural context which causes much of the variation in it, basic human needs are trans-cultural.*[45]

While this is certainly true at the base of Maslow's hierarchy, where the universal needs of physiology and safety are inherent to humanity as a species, it becomes more complicated as one ascends the pyramid into higher needs. As some scholars have written, in trying to convince a population to move toward change, mental models, beliefs, and attitudes unique to any given society are important factors to consider if one is to create a compelling vision that will bring "a sense of purpose that encourages people to change their actions."[46]

Needs are the building blocks that make up the root causes of collective action cited in doctrine, but they are not in themselves sufficient to cause resistance. As North Korea demonstrates, needs alone do not cause resistance. Only when those needs are given a context or framework wherein resistance makes sense to the "inner reasons" of a people, and seems to provide a viable path to success, will they decide that the effort is worth the risk and sacrifice. Walter R. Fisher famously proposed the narrative paradigm theory of human communication and understanding. He argued that human beings are storytellers, reasoning through decisions and actions based on the context of their own stories, which then interact with larger narratives. According to Fisher, people do not rely on logic and reason as classically defined to make decisions, but rather draw "good reasons" from "history, biography, culture, and character" to then choose an option that seems to meet their needs.[47]

The special operator should take away two fundamental principles. First, while metrics like those from *The World Factbook* (GDP, population, resources, etc.) are important indicators on emerging conflicts, the intangibles of society (convictions, history, justice, culture, tradition, identity, etc.) are the real guideposts that translate needs into action when special operators communicate with a population. The words of T.E. Lawrence regarding Arab society and their faith hold true for all people: they hold "conviction of the truth…[that] share in every act and thought and principle of their daily life," so ingrained "as to be unconscious, unless roused by opposition."[48] Whether they are called narratives, worldviews, or convictions of truth, these are at the heart of what motivates people and communities to risk their lives for a cause.

Second, people and communities are always testing, probing, and assessing the claims of others (especially outsiders) according to what they know or believe to be true, and will likely reject new claims that introduce inconsistencies or, worse, indict their convictions as wrong or backward. Fisher characterized this process as testing "narrative

probability," which concerns what makes a coherent story, and "narrative fidelity," which determines whether or not a new claim or story is consistent with currently held views.[49] Fisher advises that this testing and awareness is "inherent," informed by a "constant habit of testing" that the stories they are told or experience ring true with the stories they already know to be true in their lives.[50]

In other words, the special operator may know that what a target population wants is justice, and so frame strategic communications to say that actions and outcomes aligned with U.S. interests are steps toward justice. But how is justice framed by the population? How is it imagined? Strategic communications will likely fail if the reasoning and language of justice look, feel, and sound American because the target population knows their own reasoning and will impulsively reject what does not cohere with what they know. If, however, strategic communications are formed in light of what justice looks like *for that society*, then narrative fidelity increases. Emulation and amplification of existing voices aligned with mission objectives is even more desirable. Actions are also critical to this natural probing. If the actions of the special operator are inconsistent with the claims or narratives they present then the target audience will notice and reject the message. "What you have really done," T.E. Lawrence warns, "is to build a wall between you and their inner selves."[51] Thus, your ability to persuade that audience has been lost.

Additional insights into a narrative paradigm for thinking about resistance are found in the field of social movement theory, which seeks to explain how and why groups mobilize in collective action in both resistance and traditional activist movements. As described by Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow, the narrative nature of social movements can be divided into three frames that lead the audience to agree that collective action makes sense: diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames. Diagnostic frames first describe the problem and identify victims. Prognostic frames then articulate a proposed solution and strategy. Finally, motivational frames provide the population with the rationale for mobilization and engagement in collective action, usually including a vocabulary (or talking points) for resistance.[52] Knowledge of this logical progression in how resistance leaders make appeals to populations is particularly useful to the special operator in COIN operations, where strategic communications need to undermine popular sympathy for the insurgency and disrupt recruitment efforts.

The narrative frames outlined by Benford and Snow are likewise important for UW operations, where strategic communications seek to engender sympathy, support, and mobilization for resistance movements and against the hostile government or occupier among the population. However, the seemingly clear-cut structure of this framework opens up the risk of a formulaic approach to the construction of strategic communication narratives. While mobilizations require conceptions of problems, victims, culprits, and attainable solutions, the SOF operator must be careful to avoid approaching each element as a fill-in-the-blank system prompt, where any value will do. Such a reductionist approach to framing and presenting the case for mobilization (UW) or demobilization (COIN) would inevitably result in strategic communications that strike the audience as artificial, implausible, or unconvincing.

Hurried and careless narrative construction can also threaten the credibility of the

message through unintentional mirror-imaging—offering stories that look and sound like our own. No matter how meticulously constructed and widely propagated, such attempts will collapse under the constant barrage of popular examination, probing, opinion, and sentiment because the story does not fit. Such defeats in the information battle, especially if systematized in operational planning, would deliver fatal blows to the authenticity of the allies on the ground in the eyes of the population, thus inflicting irreparable damage to U.S. mission objectives over the long term. The audience has likely already built the components of an effective narrative themselves. An effective strategic communication will not simply try to reframe the mission objectives for the audience, but will listen to what they are already saying and repeat it back to them in the form of a call to action.

Maslow suggests that as the developing world rises economically, its popular sociopolitical movements will ascend from concern with the base needs (subsistence and security) to the elevated human needs (justice, morality, and self-actualization). Because of this climb up Maslow's hierarchy, the reasoning, language, and stories used by leaders to mobilize these movements will likewise elevate from the simple identification of problems, villains, and solutions to arguments of justice, identity, history, and meaning. For this reason, the preexisting cultural and historical narratives of societies about themselves and their own stories (or metanarratives) will become more influential in mobilizing a population and therefore more important to the special operator.

Our natural human tendency to mine for meaning in the cultural history of a society to motivate action was evident in the Arab Spring of 2011. Demonstrators in Egypt and Tunisia venerated those who died at the hands of legal authorities, either in captivity or in the streets, as martyrs for their nation. Analysis in the *Journal of Communication* showed that activist commemorations of *shuhada* (martyrs) drew from a deep well of historical, social, and religious potency.[53] These "martyr narratives in Tunisia and Egypt [date] back to pre-Islamic periods" and were translated "from the traditional religious context to the state-driven concept of civil religion," serving as a catalyst for mobilization.[54] Memorials for the dead were not only present in the streets, but also in new media, taking the form of reliquaries for martyrs shared through the Internet and social media. For this reason, it is important to note that new media and the Internet are not sufficient vehicles for change in a vacuum; they are a vehicle only, not a catalyst. "There must be," according to the authors, "a context in which certain narratives can resonate and serve as the foundation for an imagined solidarity and imagined politics of hope and change."[55] They conclude that "attention to the narrative landscape must be included in investigations of political communication and social unrest."[56] If religious-historical stories that predate even Islam can contribute to the mobilization of movements that changed the political landscape of the whole Middle East, narratives cannot be seen as peripheral or of passing importance to the missions of the special operator.

Likewise, there are also examples where narratives collapse and are rejected as false for trying to supersede the persistent and recurring historical stories (that is, how things have always happened) that shape how the population determines narrative probability. The story of liberation from the oppression of Saddam Hussein as a result of Operation *Iraqi*

Freedom, which brought the promise of a better life under representative democratic government (as opposed to strongmen, which was a pattern both in Iraq and throughout the region) later dissolved in the face of protracted conflict, poverty, and sectarian strife. The disillusionment of a once supportive public regarding the presence of U.S. forces soon followed because the narrative of liberation from the oppression of strongmen was intuitively reassessed as improbable by Iraqis in the context of their experiences. For Sunnis in particular, the new experience of retributive disenfranchisement under the Shia government saw the optimistic narrative of democratic liberation lose all credibility. Instead, two historically persistent patterns took its place: sectarian repression and "the conflict between political fragmentation and centralization" that has persisted in Iraq since "the struggles among tribes and cities for the food-producing flatlands of the river valleys."[57]

Indeed, after the departure of U.S. forces, it would have been a safe bet to wager on a repetition of the traditional narrative cycle of Iraqi conflict, where aggressive suppression by a centralizing government in Baghdad in turn provokes retaliation from traditionally fragmented regional and tribal populations. When the systematic exclusion and suppression of northern Sunni opposition by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki that began in late 2012 reached critical mass,[58] the Sunni tribal militias that once expelled al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) formed a tenuous alliance with their new incarnation (Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, or ISIL) in 2014 through the Baathist-led General Military Council of Iraqi Revolutionaries (GMCIR).[59] This alliance of convenience was formed to wage a large military offensive from northern Iraq and gain regional autonomy from the government in Baghdad.[60]

It was a decisive rejection of the narrative of a democratic and unified Iraqi state. Rejection of Iraqi unity was further solidified by the independent efforts of Iraqi Kurdish forces to take control of key regions of contention from ISIL, insisting they would hold the oil-rich regions despite complaints from Baghdad, even threatening referendums for independence.[61] The ongoing conflict in Iraq and Syria, while dominated in the public consciousness by the atrocities of the so-called Islamic State and the persistence of its "caliphate," is a reversion back to an old regional narrative: the cyclical spurning of central governance by local tribal networks. The perception that Iraq is on the verge of dissolution is only the modern telling of a recurring story, one that the Iraqi people know very well.

Implications for the Special Operator

The core missions of ARSOF and the wider SOF community require an effective capability to speak to the host or target population in ways that shape their sentiment and actions in directions that support mission success. The strategic communications and planning required for the special operator to do this will inevitably offer the audience a story, or narrative, that will hopefully resonate with the population as coherent, plausible, consistent, and addressing their needs. If the narrative content of strategic communications fails to ring true with the audience, it will also likely fail to mobilize as planned, thus threatening mission success. In particular, the story told through both strategic communications and actions should strive to be consistent with stories the target population already accepts to be true about themselves, whether political, cultural,

religious, or social. Inconsistency with these accepted stories undermines the legitimacy or viability of the one told by the special operator.

The philosopher Blaise Pascal wrote that "we are better persuaded, for the most part, by the reasons that we ourselves arrived at than by those that have come into the minds of others."[62] These are the "inner reasons" highlighted by T.E. Lawrence, which are both communicated through, and reinforced by, the traditions, principles, histories, and stories of a society. These are the raw materials that the special operator must know and use to shape the narrative of operations and strategic communications in support of UW, FID, and COIN missions. If strategic communications instead provide a narrative that implicitly mirror-images our own needs, concerns, and stories as reflecting those of the target population, they will likely fail to convince anyone.

The nuance of local narrative and culture is one reason why, as U.S. Army Chief Warrant Officer John Cochran said, "UW is the most difficult and complex of any form of combat," because it "requires its soldiers to meld into the sociological and physical environment"[63] so well that the people of the country in question feel ownership of and pride in the resistance to which they are inspired. The Solidarity movement is viewed in Poland not as a success for U.S. clandestine intelligence operations during the Cold War,[64] but as an achievement of the Polish people.[65] Such ownership by the population is not only a clear sign of a successful operation in support of a resistance; it is the gold standard. "Complete success," T.E. Lawrence wrote, "is when [they] forget your strangeness and speak naturally before you, counting you as one of themselves."[66] The same can be said about the interaction between the narratives of the people and those presented by the special operator; they should interact and flow together as a natural, logical, and uninterrupted stream of history.

It is important to remember that the population is the protagonist in its own story. Any American intervention casts U.S. forces in what is inevitably (and even preferably) a bit part or minor supporting role in the story of their own society. The more U.S. strategic communications can frame mission success as a uniquely local achievement, as opposed to an American one, the more effectively the special operator will be able to meld into the human environment and attain mission objectives. The stories written by the population itself are best suited to this end, as they are implicitly embraced from the start. If these stories are ignored, the narrative built by the special operator will sound alien and contrived, making it void of potential for mobilization. This principle is likewise essential in FID, where a sense of American or Western ownership over the outcomes of a conflict can unintentionally imply ownership or cooptation of the host government, undermining their legitimacy in the eyes of the people who, in a FID context, need to feel that the government belongs to them.

In conclusion, T.E. Lawrence was right: effective operations require the special operator to have an intimate knowledge of the society, acquired through long-term, on-the-ground experience, and reinforced with education and strong connections to academic resources. In other words, we should strive to make the special operator an expert on cultural narratives, and as adept at perceiving and using them as field stripping an M16. To achieve this, four things are essential:

- The special operator's training and education must be sufficient to understand and engage the problem of narratives.
- The special operator must master the language, idiom, and nuance of the society in the area of operations through immersion as much as possible.
- The special operator must have academic expertise at his disposal. Just as infantry soldiers can call in artillery and air strikes from a distance, the special operator should be able to call on the academic "fire-base" to leverage mission-critical expertise on the nuance and handling of targeted regional narratives. Akin to a five-paragraph field order, this resource would need to be accessible on short notice.
- The special operator should discover and amplify existing voices that have rapport among the target audience and are already arguing for narratives aligned with mission objectives. Strategic communications should emulate those messages, and the special operator should avoid any actions that would undermine their credibility. When possible, this approach should be favored in information operations over the creation of new narratives.

Russian operations and propaganda in support of separatists in eastern Ukraine through 2014 and 2015 flourished in large part because much of the target population shared their heritage, story, and culture, as they were also post-Soviet, Russian-speaking, and Russian Orthodox. Vladimir Putin's argument that ethnic Russian populations in Crimea, Donetsk, and Luhansk are "compatriots" and citizens separated from their homeland by the historical peculiarities and technicalities of the Soviet collapse rang true with many communities.[67] Their ethno-linguistic grievances with cultural policies out of Kiev are longstanding[68] and contentious.[69] U.S. Special Operation Forces, on the other hand, are not afforded these luxuries. American culture and assumptions are not present in any area of operations to which they will be deployed. Therefore, members of the SOF community must be students, immersed in experience and knowledge of not only the people in their area of operations, but also the narratives that translate the needs of the people into motivation for action.[70] This is an uphill battle, but that is why U.S. SOF are "carefully selected, well trained, and well led."[71] They have to be the best there is at what they do. PRISM

Notes

[1] The opinions in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory or its sponsors. The author would like to thank his colleagues Dr. Robert Leonhard, William Riggs and Lesa McComas for their insights and feedback on drafts of this article.

[2] "SOF Truths," United States Special Operations Command, accessed June 28, 2014, <http://www.socom.mil/Pages/SOFTruths.aspx>.

[3] Another definition of human factors is "the totality of the physical, cultural, psychological, and social environments that influence human behavior to the extent that the success of any military operation or campaign depends on the application of unique capabilities that are designed to influence, fight, and win in the population-centric conflicts" MAJ James F. Razuri, "Harnessing the Human Domain in Warfare," 26th Annual SO/LIC Symposium & Exhibition (January 26-28, 2015), <http://www.dtic.mil/ndia/2015SOLIC/HumanDomainFinalEdits.

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[4] *Human Factors Considerations of Undergrounds in Insurgencies*, Second Edition, ed. Nathan Bos (Fort Bragg: The United States Army Special Operations Command, 2013), 367.

[5] "Activities conducted to enable a resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, disrupt, or overthrow an occupying power or government by operating through or with an underground, auxiliary, and guerrilla force in a denied area." Mark Grdovic, "Developing a Common Understanding of Unconventional Warfare," *Joint Force Quarterly* 57, 2nd quarter (2010): 136.

[6] "Participation by civilian and military agencies of a government in any of the action programs taken by another government or other designated organization to free and protect its society from subversion, lawlessness, insurgency, terrorism, and other threats to its security." U.S. Department of the Army, FM 3-24: Insurgencies and Countering Insurgencies (Washington, DC: Headquarters of the Department of the Army, May 2014), Glossary-3.

[7] This use of the word "narrative" is distinct from that used in some doctrine as the "overarching expression of the context and desired results" of a mission, and should be understood in reference to the subservient doctrinal ideas of "theme" and "message" as the concepts and products directly engaged with foreign publics. Theme is the "unifying idea(s) or intention(s) that supports the narrative and is/are designed to provide guidance and continuity for messaging and related products." Message is "a tailored communication directed at a specific public, aligned with a specific theme, in support of a specific objective." U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, JDN 2-13: Commander's Communication Synchronization (December 16, 2013), III-9.

[8] "Military information support operations (MISO) are planned to convey selected information and indicators to foreign audiences to influence their emotions, motives, objective reasoning, and ultimately the behavior of foreign governments, organizations, groups, and individuals in a manner favorable to the originator's objectives." U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, JP 3-05: Special Operations (July 16, 2014), xi.

[9] This article uses "strategic communications" as a blanket term to include MISO. "Focused United States Government efforts to understand and engage key audiences to create, strengthen, or preserve conditions favorable for the advancement of United States Government interests, policies, and objectives through the use of coordinated programs, plans, themes, messages, and products synchronized with the actions of all instruments of national power." U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, JP 1-02: Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms (January 15, 2016), 226.

[10] Defined as "a violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant population[s]." FM 3-24, Glossary-3.

[11] Ibid, 4-3.

[12] Ibid, 4-4.

[13] Ibid, 4-14.

[14] Sayid Qutb, *Milestones* (USA: SIME journal, 2005): 33, <http://majalla.org/books/2005/qutb-nilestone.pdf>.

[15] FM 3-24, 4-14.

[16] FM 3-24 defines ideology as "the integrated assertions, theories, and aims that constitute a sociopolitical program." Ibid, 4-9.

[17] Ibid, 4-14.

[18] Ibid, 4-3.

[19] Sayid Qutb, *Milestones*

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